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SUBJECT: NLD STATUS REPORT: SIX MONTHS AFTER ASSK'S RELEASE

REF: RANGOON 575 AND 578

1. (SBU) Summary: Almost six months after her release from house detention, ASSK continues with a disciplined, non-confrontational strategy to rebuild her political forces while attempting to draw the regime into dialogue on national reconciliation. She has succeeded in reviving NLD leadership, reopening offices, and rebuilding ties with other political entities, including ethnic groups. She has traveled to various locations outside Rangoon, met with UN, NGO and foreign officials, and refined her stance on international assistance and other issues. While carefully avoiding any direct criticism of the regime, ASSK has expressed her dismay at deteriorating social and economic conditions and consistently called on the SPDC to join with the NLD in fostering positive change. She also continues to press the SPDC for the release of all political prisoners, and restoration of political freedoms for Burma's people and its political parties. In sum, ASSK has kept the moral pressure on the regime, while slowly but surely expanding the political space for political parties and other members of the opposition. However, she has been careful throughout not to give the SPDC any reason to end the NLD's somewhat increased liberties. End Summary

#### Building Trust, Rebuilding the Party

2. (SBU) The May 6 release of Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK), after almost 19 months of house detention (reftels), was expected to mark the end of confidence building and the beginning of substantive dialogue on national reconciliation between her party, the National League for Democracy, and the ruling junta, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Unfortunately, the SPDC has not responded to the NLD and international community's calls for dialogue, political reform, and the release of all political prisoners. It has, however, released about 158 political prisoners since May. At the same time, SPDC economic policies are creating greater hardships throughout the country. The SPDC also began arresting and sentencing political activists in greater numbers than it had since confidence-building talks began in October 2000. Altogether, about 45 persons were detained in August and September, although about half of these were subsequently released. Meanwhile, ASSK has maintained a well-disciplined, non-confrontational strategy to rebuild her political forces while attempting to draw the SPDC into dialogue.

3. (SBU) In the first few weeks after ASSK's May 6 release, government officials harassed some of the individuals and organizations that she visited. She was prohibited from visiting government projects, UN organizations were warned not to meet with her, and staff of an international NGO were harassed after her visit to their project site. Discreetly and patiently, ASSK worked with military intelligence (MI) to address these and other actions that contradicted the government's commitment to allow her freedom of movement.

4. (SBU) ASSK has also kept her own party under control. She has prohibited any NLD criticism of the SPDC. The NLD made no public mention of the limitations on her movements or harassment of those with whom she met. When she traveled to project sites and witnessed the desperate conditions people live under she made no public criticism of the SPDC. Instead, she cited the conditions as an imperative for the SPDC, NLD, and others to work together to address the needs of the people. Even when the SPDC arrested NLD youth in Rangoon for carrying illegal literature and NLD leaders in Shan State for "acts against the state," she did not speak out except to insist that they receive legal representation and due process.

5. (SBU) ASSK also avoided any public criticism of the SPDC on human rights issues including the allegations of military rapes in Shan State. Despite rumors of some grumbling within the NLD over this conciliatory stance, ASSK has enforced strict party discipline. As a result, there have been no instances of lower level leaders or members publicly criticizing the regime.

#### Pressure Builds for Action

6. (SBU) While ASSK has used the time since her release to

travel to five locations in states and divisions to reopen party offices (now up to 66 out of 330) and rebuild party organization, she has also had to contend with increasing internal and international pressure for a change in the decade old political stalemate between the NLD and the SPDC. The international community viewed her release with optimism and donor countries, the UN, and NGOs began positioning for increased assistance to the country. At the same time, the increasingly dire humanitarian crisis in Burma put pressure on ASSK to agree to increased levels of humanitarian support. With no real political progress, however, she has emphasized that foreign assistance would be welcome only if it did not directly benefit the SPDC and was carefully targeted and monitored to ensure that it reached the people. Based on this criteria, she has endorsed HIV/AIDS funding by the U.S. (\$1m to international NGOs) and the U.K. (\$15 million to UN agencies and international NGO,s) and other discrete assistance projects in the country.

17. (SBU) ASSK has also faced pressure from ethnic groups who support the NLD but who want their interests represented in any dialogue with the SPDC. Shortly after her release ASSK met with ethnic leaders and convinced them that dialogue with the SPDC must begin with the NLD and later, at an appropriate stage, expand to include ethnic groups. She reassured them that the NLD would be negotiating for all the people of Burma, not just the NLD constituency. Special Envoy Razali also advocated this approach, and encouraged ethnic leaders to meet and develop common positions so they would be prepared when tripartite dialogue began. As months went by and the SPDC failed to initiate dialogue with the NLD, ethnic groups became increasingly frustrated by the lack of progress.

#### The CRPP: A Shift in Tactics?

18. (SBU) On October 23 the NLD and ethnic parties announced the expansion of the Committee Representing the Peoples, Parliament (CRPP), a Committee the SPDC views as a direct challenge to its legitimacy. The CRPP, after all, had declared when it was founded in 1998 that the SPDC was not the legitimate government and that the CRPP would act as a parliamentary body until the military allowed a return to an elected government. Widespread arrests of Members of Parliament-elect and political activists (some of whom remain in prison) followed.

19. (SBU) The revival and expansion of the CRPP now (to include leaders of four ethnic parties that received a substantial number of ethnic votes in the 1990 elections) appears to be a calculated move to consolidate ethnic support behind the NLD, facilitate coordination among the ethnic groups and the NLD, and prod the SPDC toward substantive dialogue. Apparently, ASSK believes changed circumstances will prevent another crackdown similar to the one in 1998. She has demonstrated that she can maintain confidentiality in her discussions with the SPDC, that she can maintain party discipline to work constructively with the regime, and that she enjoys the support of at least some ethnic leaders. Apparently, ASSK hopes this will be enough to deter the SPDC from initiating a new round of political arrests.

#### Next Steps....

10. (SBU) While there is no sign that the SPDC is yet moving toward substantive dialogue with the NLD on constitutional issues, deteriorating economic conditions and international pressure for change may combine to spur the regime in that direction. Special Envoy Razali will return to Rangoon on November 12 and will likely call for the SPDC to follow through on its earlier commitments to work with the NLD, increase political freedoms, and release political prisoners. The international community is also pressing the regime for political reforms to address reports of human rights abuses and the looming humanitarian crisis. Many here believe the SPDC has backed itself into a corner with its poor management of the economy. In any case, the NLD has continued to press for change, albeit quietly.

11. (SBU) Looking ahead, however, there must be questions as to how long the current disciplined dialogue will endure without real progress on central issues. Unquestionably, the continued confidence-building has been welcome. Given the hate that has built up in Burma over the past 60 years, there will be scope for additional confidence-building between all the communities for at least the next several generations. Nevertheless, unless all parties are soon showed a goal, and a road map for democratic change, then even the small measure of goodwill that has been built up between the government and the opposition could be washed away. Both sides seem to recognize this, but both must equally be willing to act on critical issues. ASSK now is ready to act. We have seen no indication, however, that the SPDC is willing to meet her, even halfway.

Martinez